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A M I D S U M M E R CELEBRATION

by Mike Nichols (a.k.a. Gwydion)

In addition to the four great festivals of the Pagan Celtic year, there are four lesser holidays as well: the two solstices, and the two equinoxes. In folklore, these are referred to as the four 'quarter-days' of the year, and modern Witches call them the four 'Lesser Sabbats', or the four 'Low Holidays'. The Summer Solstice is one of them.

Technically, a solstice is an astronomical point and, due to the procession to the equinox, the date may vary by a few days depending on the year. The summer solstice occurs when the sun reaches the Tropic of Cancer, and we experience the longest day and the shortest night of the year. Astrologers know this as the date on which the sun enters the sign of Cancer. This year it will occur at 10:57 pm CDT on June 21st.

However, since most European peasants were not accomplished at reading an ephemeris or did not live close enough to Salisbury Plain to trot over to Stonehenge and sight down it's main avenue, they celebrated the event on a fixed calendar date, June 24th. The slight forward displacement of the traditional date is the result of multitudinous calendrical changes down through the ages. It is analogous to the winter solstice celebration, which is astronomically on or about December 21st, but is celebrated on the traditional date of December 25th, Yule, later adopted by the Christians.

Again, it must be remembered that

the Celts reckoned their days from sundown to sundown, so the June 24th festivities actually begin on the previous sundown (our June 23rd). This was Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Eve. Which brings up another point: our modern calendars are quite misguided in suggesting that 'summer begins' on the solstice. According to the old folk calendar, summer BEGINS on May Day and ends on Lammas (August 1st), with the summer solstice, midway between the two, marking MID-summer. This makes more logical sense than suggesting that summer begins on the day when the sun's power begins to wane and the days grow shorter.

Although our Pagan ancestors probably preferred June 24th (and indeed most European folk festivals today use this date), the sensibility of modern Witches seems to prefer the actual solstice point, beginning the celebration at sunset. Again, it gives modern Pagans a range of dates to choose from with, hopefully, a weekend embedded in it. (And this year, the moon is waxing throughout.)

As the Pagan mid-winter celebration of Yule was adopted by Christians as Christmas (December 25th), so too the Pagan mid-summer celebration was adopted by them as the feast of John the Baptist (June 24th). Occurring 180 degrees apart on the wheel of the year, the mid-winter celebration commemorates the birth of Jesus, while the mid-summer celebration commemorates the birth of John, the prophet who was born six months before Jesus in order to announce his arrival.

This last tidbit is extremely conspicuous, in that John is the ONLY saint in the entire Catholic hagiography whose feast day is a commemoration of his birth, rather than his death. A generation ago, Catholic nuns were fond of explaining that a saint is commemorated on the anniversary of his or her death

because it was really a 'birth' into the Kingdom of Heaven. But John the Baptist, the sole exception, is emphatically commemorated on the anniversary of his birth into THIS world. Although this makes no sense viewed from a Christian perspective, it makes perfect poetic sense from the viewpoint of Pagan symbolism.

In most Pagan cultures, the sun god is seen as split between two rival personalities: the god of light and his twin, his 'weird', his 'other self', the god of darkness. They are Gawain and the Green Knight, Gwyn and Gwythyr, Llew and Goronwy, Lugh and Balor, Balan and Balin, the Holly King and the Oak King, etc. Often they are depicted as fighting seasonal battles for the favor of their goddess/lover, such as Creiddylad or Blodeuwedd, who represents Nature.

The god of light is always born at the winter solstice, and his strength waxes with the lengthening days, until the moment of his greatest power, the summer solstice, the longest day. And, like a look in a mirror, his 'shadow self', the lord of darkness, is born at the summer solstice, and his strength waxes with the lengthening nights until the moment of his greatest power, the winter solstice, the longest night.

Indirect evidence supporting this mirror-birth pattern is strongest in the Christianized form of the Pagan myth. Many writers, from Robert Graves to Stewart Farrar, have repeatedly pointed out that Jesus was identified with the Holly King, while John the Baptist was the Oak King. That is why, 'of all the trees that are in the wood, the Holly tree bears the crown.' If the birth of Jesus, the 'light of the world', is celebrated at mid-winter, Christian folk tradition insists that John the Oak King was born (rather than died) at mid-summer.

It is at this point that I must diverge from the opinion of Robert Graves and other writers who have followed him. Graves believes that at midsummer, the Sun King is slain by his rival, the God of Darkness; just as the God of Darkness is, in turn, slain by the God of Light at midwinter. And yet, in Christian folk tradition (derived from the older Pagan strain), it is births, not deaths, that are associated with the solstices. For the feast of John the Baptist, this is all the more conspicuous, as it breaks the rules regarding all other saints.

So if births are associated with the solstices, when do the symbolic deaths occur? When does Goronwy slay Llew and when does Llew, in his turn, slay Goronwy? When does darkness conquer light or light conquer darkness? Obviously (to me, at least), it must be at the two equinoxes. At the autumnal equinox, the hours of light in the day are eclipsed by the hours of darkness. At the vernal equinox, the process is reversed. Also, the autumnal equinox, called 'Harvest Home', is already associated with sacrifice, principally that of the spirit of grain or vegetation. In this case, the god of light would be identical.

In Welsh mythology in particular, there is a startling vindication of the seasonal placement of the sun god's death, the significance of which occurred to me in a recent dream, and which I haven't seen elsewhere. Llew is the Welsh god of light, and his name means 'lion'. (The lion is often the symbol of a sun god.) He is betrayed by his 'virgin' wife Blodeuwedd, into standing with one foot on the rim of a cauldron and the other on the back of a goat. It is only in this way that Llew can be killed, and Blodeuwedd's lover, Goronwy, Llew's dark self, is hiding nearby with a spear at the ready. But as Llew is struck with it, he is not

killed. He is instead transformed into an eagle.

Putting this in the form of a Bardic riddle, it would go something like this: Who can tell in what season the Lion (Llew), betrayed by the Virgin (Blodeuwedd), poised on the Balance, is transformed into an Eagle? My readers who are astrologers are probably already gasping in recognition. The sequence is astrological and in proper order: Leo (lion), Virgo (virgin), Libra (balance), and Scorpio (for which the eagle is a well-known alternative symbol). Also, the remaining icons, cauldron and goat, could arguably symbolize Cancer and Capricorn, representing summer and winter, the signs beginning with the two solstice points. So Llew is balanced between cauldron and goat, between summer and winter, on the balance (Libra) point of the autumnal equinox.

This, of course, is the answer to a related Bardic riddle. Repeatedly, the 'Mabinogion' tells us that Llew must be standing with one foot on the cauldron and one foot on the goat's back in order to be killed. But nowhere does it tell us why. Why is this particular situation the ONLY one in which Llew can be overcome? Because it represents the equinox point. And the equinox is the only time of the entire year when light (Llew) can be overcome by darkness (Goronwy).

It should now come as no surprise that, when it is time for Llew to kill Goronwy in his turn, Llew insists that Goronwy stands where he once stood while he (Llew) casts the spear. This is no mere vindictiveness on Llew's part. For, although the 'Mabinogion' does not say so, it should by now be obvious that this is the only time when Goronwy can be overcome. Light can overcome darkness only at the equinox -- this time the vernal equinox.

So Midsummer (to me, at least) is a celebration of the sun god at his zenith, a crowned king on his throne. He is at the height of his strength and still 1/4 of a year away from his ritual death at the hands of his rival. The spear and the cauldron have often been used as symbols for this holiday and it should now be easy to see why. Sun gods are virtually always associated with spears (even Jesus is pierced by one), and the midsummer cauldron of Cancer is a symbol of the Goddess in her fullness. It is an especially beautiful time of the year for an outdoor celebration. May yours be magical!

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